

Old Governors Mansion  
304 North Ewing  
Helena  
Lewis and Clark County  
Montana

HABS No. MT-31

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

OLD GOVERNORS MANSION

HABS No. MT-31

ADDRESS: 304 North Ewing, Helena, Lewis and Clark County, Montana

OWNER: State of Montana

OCCUPANT: Department of Planning and Economic  
Development

USE: Office space

HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The handsome pressed brick, terra cotta and stone Victorian mansion was designed by Cass Gilbert, whose office was then in St. Paul, Minnesota, for the William A. Chessman family in 1884. It was completed the following year at a cost of \$85,000. It stands today as one of those structures built in the "Victorian era of Montana's fabulous sow-belly and beans to oysters and caviar transition period". (Gill, Larry, "Governors Old Mansion Cold, Quiet", Montana Parade, Great Falls Tribune, Great Falls, Montana, January 15, 1961.)

In 1913 the State of Montana purchased the building for use as a Governor's Mansion. Here the chief executive of the state lived and entertained from the governorship of Sam V. Stewart in 1913 until that of J. Hugo Aronson in 1959, when a newer and far less elegant mansion was erected several blocks east of the Capitol building.

The Old Governors Mansion's fate was in jeopardy for a few years after the building of the new structure, but historians and interested citizens rallied to save the building. It was used for headquarters for the State Centennial Commission from 1963-65, and now houses the state office of Planning and Economic Development.

## HISTORICAL INFORMATION

William A. Chessman was born in Braintree, Massachusetts on August 19, 1830. He went to California in 1849 in the gold rush, then came to Montana in 1865. He went first to the rich diggings at Alder Gulch (Virginia City), then migrated to Last Chance Gulch (now Helena).

Chessman was prominent in early mining operations, and in 1875 began building a bedrock flume which was used for reworking old ground and tailings in Last Chance Gulch. He organized the Helena Consolidated Water Company in 1889, and became president of that company. He was vice-president and one of the original backers of the Helena Electric Street Railway Company, head of the Bald Butte Mining Company, and had interests in cattle raising in the area.

Chessman was representative of a number of pioneer Montanans who came to the Territory to seek and find a fortune. Helena, during the 1880's and early 1890's, could boast of being one of the most prosperous towns in the country and the home of fifty millionaires. Unlike some of the others who amassed a fortune in Montana only to retire to Park Avenue in New York City, William A. Chessman remained in Helena until his death on October 2, 1920.

Like many of the other prominent citizens who were building mansions in keeping with their newly-acquired wealth, Chessman employed the services of an eastern architect. Cass Gilbert was engaged to design an elegant home on the site once occupied by a sod-covered log shack. J. H. Kent of Helena served as the Supervising Architect, although Gilbert did travel to Helena to check progress of the work. E. W. Fisk was the builder. Kent's name crops up again as Supervising Architect for the completion of the state capitol building following the scandal that rocked the state in the late 1890's.

The cut stone foundation was quarried near Helena, but on the insistance of Cass Gilbert, the pressed brick and terra cotta came from Zanesville,

Ohio, the hardwoods from the east and mahogany from South America for the interior trim. Seven handsome fireplaces of imported marble were included in the design.

Shortly after the turn of the century the building and grounds, including a two-story brick carriage house to the northwest of the main house, were purchased by Peter Larson, a leading railroad contractor who worked on the construction of the Northern Pacific, Washington Central and Spokane railroads.

In 1911, the property was purchased by George Conrad of the Conrad Trust and Savings Bank. The State of Montana bought the property in March, 1913, for use as a Governors Mansion, and it served in that capacity until 1959, when a more up-to-date but less elegant structure was built for the purpose. The state reportedly purchased the property for \$30,000, a fraction of its original cost.

#### SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL AND SOURCES

Butte Miner (newspaper), Butte, Montana, October 3, 1920.

Campbell, William C., From the Quarries of Last Chance Gulch, Montana Record Publishing Co., Helena, 1951, vol. I.

Gill, Larry, "Governor's Old Mansion Cold, Quiet", Montana Parade Section, Great Falls Tribune, Great Falls, Montana, January 15, 1961.

Helena Independent (newspaper), Helena, Montana, October 4, 1920.

Miller, Joaquin, An Illustrated History of the State of Montana, Lewis Publishing Co., Chicago, 1894.

Thresher, Frank L., Helena Illustrated, publ. by author, Minneapolis, 1890.

#### ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

##### EXTERIOR

Overall Dimensions - 48'-4" x 64'-6".

Foundations - native granite, partially exposed above grade.

Wall Construction - masonry bearing walls of pressed brick with terra cotta trim.

Porches - A wooden porch across the entire front of the building wraps around on each side for a short distance. Part of this porch was later glassed-in.

Openings - Entrance: arched doorway with two oak doors and a glass transom.

Windows: all windows are wood framed and have stone sills. East (front) facade - arched 5 light windows, D.H. 1/1 arched heads, dormer O.H. 3/3; south elevation - D.H. 1/1 wood windows, bay window with stained glass transom, gable end has 13 light window arched head flanked by 2 D.H. 1/1 windows; north elevation - six stained glass fixed units, three D.H. 1/1 units, one fixed 10/1 unit flanked by D.H. 10/1 units, gable end arched windows, double 1 light casement units with stone head.

Roof- shingle roof approximately 45° pitch, combination gable and hip; boxed-in eaves.

Chimneys - brick.

## INTERIOR

Floor Plan - Originally the structure had 20 rooms and 7 fireplaces of imported marble or ceramic tile. The main floor included an entry hall, two parlors, dining room, den, kitchen, main staircase and back staircase. The second floor contained the sleeping quarters of the Chessmans, bathrooms, guest rooms and servants' quarters. The third floor was a big ballroom used for social and recreation activities.

Stairway - open stairway to second floor, oak balustrade.

Flooring - hardwood and T & G pine; some areas carpeted.

Wall and Ceiling Finish - plaster, wallpaper, leather-covered, oak paneling, mahogany trim.

#### OTHER

General Setting - The house is situated at the northwest corner of the intersection of North Ewing and 6th Avenue. The lot is shaded by a number of large trees.

Enclosure - There is a stone fence on the east and south property lines.

Outbuildings - A 1½ story brick carriage house, 24' north-south and 75'-2" east-west, stands in the northwest corner of the lot, roofed by a shingled gable roof.

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